Predicting Who is Apt to Defend Peers from Peer Victimization

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Summary of the Meta-Analysis

Defending behavior of peer victimization in school and cyber context during childhood and adolescence: A meta-analytic review of individual and peer-relational characteristics.

Peer victimization is the receipt of aggression from peers, which may take the form of physically violent acts, verbal assaults, as well as relational aggression, meant to harm peers’ reputations or social relationships. There are clear negative outcomes associated with experiencing peer victimization, which is distressing to victims and to witnesses of victimization. Some of these witnesses actively help their victimized peers and referred to as defenders. Defending includes comforting the victim, getting the help of an adult or others, assertively standing up to the aggressor, retaliating against the aggressor through aggressive means, being friends with the victim and staying with the victim as a protective measure, and other behavior enacted with the intention of supporting victims. It is important to understand which youth tend to be defenders in child and adolescent peers groups because defending can stop peer victimization from continuing, and victims who are defended tend to fare better than victims who are not.

Defending of peer victimization in the school and cyber context is an important component of anti-bullying interventions and has received increased attention in developmental science. However, the overall prevalence, and individual characteristics that are associated with defending have not been systematically and statistically reviewed. The meta-analytic review we conducted included 172 reports of defending. Altogether, 150,978 child and adolescent participants from four continents were included in the review. We analyzed (1) the average proportion of defenders in the population and (2) associations between defending and individual and peer-relational correlates of defending in school and cyber contexts.

Forty-three percent of child and adolescent participants were identified as defenders, those who would do something to help or support a victimized peer in an instance of peer victimization. Further, the results confirmed prior findings of gender differences; girls were more likely to defend than boys. Younger children were more likely to defend than older children or adolescents. Youth who were more empathic defended more. It seems that when people can understand the plight of their victimized peers, they tend to want to do something to help. Interestingly, youth who are victims of peer victimization or bullying themselves are more likely to defend, likely because they have that greater empathy for their victimized peers. In contrast, those who justify aggressive behavior in order to decrease feelings of acting in a morally unjust way, referred to as moral disengagement, are less likely to defend. Having confidence and belief in one’s ability to defend, referred to a self-efficacy, is associated with more defending. Being more popular and accepted by peers is also associated with defending. Researchers believe that children and adolescents who have more social “power” in the peer group can probably stand up to bullies with less fear of negative repercussions. Also, being more popular and accepted might be related to self-efficacy to defend.

It is important to note that the methods with which the researchers conducted their studies may have impacts on the associations just reported. Together, the results suggest that researchers are largely on track in their understanding of characteristics of defenders and that researchers should consider methodological effects when interpreting their findings.

The Power of Meta-Analysis

I encourage all students passionate about a topic or interested in quantitative data analysis to explore the possibility of writing a meta-analysis with a faculty researcher. It provides the opportunity to become
completely immersed in a body of literature and to benefit the field of research by providing a methodologically rigorous, comprehensive summary of available research. And what an opportunity to develop expertise in methods, theory, and conclusions in a particular field!

**Collaboration in a Networked World**

One unique part of writing this publication was the ability to work with colleagues with a shared interest who live quite far apart from one another. Although I had never met my collaborators in person, we were familiar with each other’s work. Under Dr. Ma’s leadership, we effectively communicated and organized this giant project by making use of technological tools including video-conferencing, shared documents, and cloud-based storage.

The full paper will be published *Psychological Bulletin* in September 2019 and is available here: [https://psycnet.apa.org/buy/2019-42431-001](https://psycnet.apa.org/buy/2019-42431-001)